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Tuesday, May 19, 2015

Teacher Tuesday: drum circle lesson ideas

If you missed it, make sure you check out my [previous post](#) on the logistics of setting up, organizing, and running a drumming circle in your classroom. Today's post is focused on my favorite lesson ideas and activities to use in the drumming circle. These basic ideas have worked well for me with students in first grade all the way up to eighth grade (and I'm pretty sure they would work with high schoolers too!). I'm listing them here in the order that I usually introduce them to my students.



1. Basic techniques and vocabulary

I intentionally start the drum circle with an activity that requires the students to hold the drum without playing it, just to make sure everyone is focused and understands that I really mean it when I tell them they will sit out if they play their drum, even by mistake, when it is not their turn! We start off by going over how to hold the drum, and the names of the different parts of the drum (rim, head, body etc). I also go over the parts of the hand (heel, finger, knuckle, palm, side) that we will be using to play the drum. From this point on, I try to only use the specific vocabulary when I am describing what to do. I introduce each playing technique by giving a brief description (1 sentence max!) and then demonstrating. I then use that one technique to play different 4-beat patterns and have them copy it back. Here is a demonstration of some basic playing techniques you can use on most drums (I wouldn't use this video with students- too much verbal explanation etc- but it is a good model if you are working on it yourself before leading the group):



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2. "Let's All Play Our Drum"

This is a great way to really get students to focus on listening, and also get some practice on the basic playing techniques. Basically you say the phrase, "let's all play our drum", and everyone plays their drum on the word "drum". I usually specify which playing technique they should use so they can practice different ones throughout the exercise. Say the sentence at different speeds and see if they can play at the right time. Then start taking words away and have them use inner hearing to know when to play- you say "Let's all...", they hear "play our" in their heads, and play on the word "drum". There are other variations of this as well, which you can see in the video below:

Kalani - Let's All Play Our Drum Game



3. Pass the Pattern

I start this by having them echo some 4-beat rhythms after me again, then having each person take turns playing that pattern all the way around the circle. Focus on keeping the beat steady and having no gaps between each person. Then explain that you are going to start passing a new pattern around the circle while the first is still circling. Have each student point to the person before them, to whom they should listen. The people across the circle will be doing a different pattern so they should NOT listen to them! My older students have been able to get up to 4 patterns going at a time. Everybody loves the challenge of this one!

Kalani - Orbit II Game



4. Longer Patterns

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PLEASE NOTE THAT SOME POSTS CONTAIN AMAZON AFFILIATE LINKS. THAT JUST MEANS THAT IF I SEND YOU TO AMAZON TO FIND A RELEVANT PRODUCT THAT I MENTION IN A POST, THEY GIVE ME CREDIT FOR REFERRING YOU- IT DOESN'T CHANGE THE COST OR ANYTHING ELSE ABOUT YOUR PURCHASE OR YOUR READING EXPERIENCE.

While we're in the echoing mood, I teach the students a more complex pattern, mixing some playing techniques and using more complex rhythms, with a mnemonic device- I match the rhythm to a phrase and have the students repeat the phrase after me several times so they internalize the rhythm. Our favorites have been, "yum, yum, tastes like chicken", "Mom, I'm home, and now I want to eat", and "come and get your ice cream! come and get it now!" (yes, I like to talk about food). Once they can say it correctly, I have them echo the pattern on the drum slowly while saying it, eventually speeding it up and taking away the words.

5. Improv Circle

This time, instead of copying the pattern of the person before them, everyone is going to make up their own rhythm! Each person gets 4 beats to improvise. Go around the circle without stopping (like the beginning of the Pass the Pattern game). For younger students I usually count each person's 4 beats by holding up my fingers towards them. I tell them that if someone misses their turn, that is a 4-beat rest- we will not give you another turn or stop for you! This is also a good time to talk about the importance of respect for yourself and others and especially focus on facial expressions. I encourage them not to make a cringing face when they improv (a common defense mechanism), laugh, or react negatively to anyone else's playing.

6. Improve Circle 2

Once students are comfortable improvising, remind them of one of the longer patterns you practiced with a phrase. Practice everyone playing that pattern together, clapping for 4 beats, then repeating the pattern. Once they can do that, tell students that the 4 beats of clapping is when one person will be improvising. Everyone will play the pattern in between each person's turn to improv.

Highland Elementary's World Drumming Ensemble Perform Durin...



7. Drum Talk

Everyone continues to improvise in this activity, but this time instead of going straight around the circle, you improvise in between each student's turn. Go all the way around the circle with this pattern once to make sure students understand the new order. Now tell them that if you play 3 notes (ti-ti ta or 1-&-2) at any time, everyone needs to copy it whether it is their turn or not. After that, the order will resume as before. Eventually of course I like to up the ante and have any students who miss the echo pattern put their drums down for the rest of the round. I also raise the level of difficulty with my older students by telling students they can also play the echo pattern on their turn (and they would improvise something else after everyone else echos).

Drum Talk Game



8. Free For All

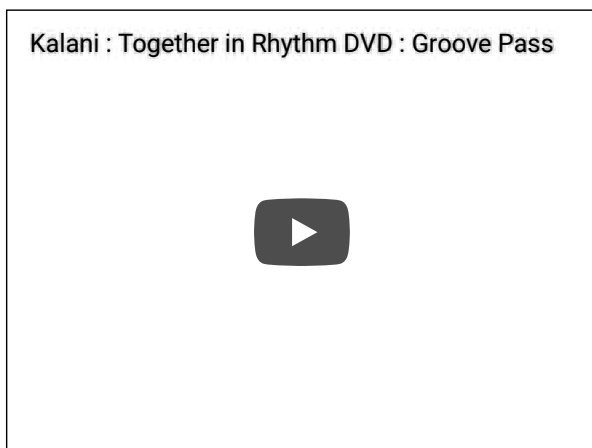
If your group is focused and positive, it is great fun to get to the point where I can just tell students to watch me and play something appropriate, and just go to town jamming with the whole group. Here's an example, but you can see how if

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everyone is watching, listening, and comfortable in the circle, you can take this in many different ways and is a great way to culminate the drum circle time:



You can find all of the sources linked here, plus many other great drum circle and world music ideas, on my Pinterest board called [Music Teaching: World Music and Drum Circles](#). If you have other great resources for drumming circles, please share and I'll add them to the board!! Leave a comment here or share on [my Facebook page](#)!

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Posted by [Elizabeth Caldwell](#) at [3:30 AM](#)



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12 comments :



[Yellow Brick Road Blog](#) January 8, 2016 at 1:46 PM

I love the drum talk game. I think it would put a lot of students at ease to improvise in that way. #fermatafridays

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[Elizabeth Caldwell](#) January 13, 2016 at 4:47 AM

Oh my goodness, that game is so much fun! And yes, it does help a lot for kids who are hesitant to make something up on the spot. Thanks for the comment!

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[Abby Bordak-Raaflaub](#) December 20, 2016 at 9:15 AM

This is excellent! I have been looking everywhere for great resources to use with my 6th grade general music class and I think I have found it! Thank you so much for posting this!

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[Elizabeth Caldwell](#) December 21, 2016 at 6:29 AM

My students in 5th/6th grade love drumming circles- I'm sure yours will as well! Thank you so much for commenting, I hope everything goes smoothly, and let me know if you have any questions as you get started :)

[Reply](#)



Aimee February 16, 2017 at 8:53 AM

I use all of these. Love orbit game and Kalani's videos and instructional techniques are beautiful! After we have played games and improvised i play a piece of "New Age"ish music and we improvise along with that, eventually small groups forming patterns together and getting in a groove. Fun stuff!!

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Elizabeth Caldwell February 18, 2017 at 7:23 AM

Great tip! Playing along with a recording is a great way to help kids stay on track and come up with their own improvised grooves. I love all of Kalani's stuff too!

[Reply](#)



Sgroggo June 5, 2017 at 9:38 PM

Exactly what i was lookin for!
Thank and greeting from Italy!

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Elizabeth Caldwell June 7, 2017 at 5:45 AM

Awesome, I'm so glad to hear you found some helpful ideas! I hope your drumming circle goes well! Enjoy!

[Reply](#)



Jenny Baxter July 28, 2017 at 3:34 AM

What a fantastic blog post! Have been looking for some ideas for mixing up our 6-8year olds' music lessons at school...these ideas will keep us busy for weeks and months to come! Thank you for sharing.

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Elizabeth Caldwell August 1, 2017 at 9:27 AM

You're welcome! So glad you found it useful! :)

[Reply](#)



Rebecca E Davis December 2, 2017 at 9:50 AM

I love the ideas! Drum circles are one of my kids favorite things to do. We just finished up one last week. We used body conducting-- one person goes into the middle of the circle and you may one noise for each step that they take. Love these ideas and will be incorporating them soon!

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Elizabeth Caldwell December 4, 2017 at 6:44 AM

Thank you! I love your idea. What a great way to keep students focused, and an awesome introduction to "conducting" :) Thanks for sharing!

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